

Jesus is the Bridegroom

Luke 5:33-39

On the face of it this passage is about fasting. John the Baptist's disciples and the Pharisees want to know why Jesus' disciples aren't fasting. But scratch below that and their question goes way deeper. And here's why: what to us seems like a trivial issue - if they want to fast let them fast, but if they don't, don't make a big deal of it, to the religious person in first century Judea, this was a big deal.

And it was a big deal because of why they fasted. The Pharisees fasted twice a week: Mondays and Thursdays, to pray for the nation of Israel. In addition, people would fast on the Day of Atonement, and there was a four-day fast to recall the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians. Then they would also fast in penitence for their and the nation's sins and if a family member died they would fast in mourning.

So fasting had these heavy overtones of mourning, recalling God's judgment, longing for God to restore the fortunes of Israel. They were fasting for what had been destroyed and in mournful longing for what wasn't yet.

So to the religious observer this wasn't some minor issue, fasting was how you displayed your piety, this was a mark of how serious you were about God; this was one of the measures of your commitment to the nation and God's purposes for the nation.

And here comes Jesus, mixing with sinners and going to their parties, eating and drinking, and feasting and celebrating, and he thinks he's a man of God?!

So their questioning about Jesus' disciples fasting was really a question about Jesus' piety, about his religious devotion, they're questioning his credentials as a teacher of Israel.

But listen to how Jesus responds: v34 And Jesus said to them 'Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?'

This isn't a funeral wake, Jesus says. This new thing that God is doing, this new wine into new wineskins, it's not a funeral. It's a wedding feast. Jesus hasn't come simply to go along with the Pharisees and patch up the holes in their religion, like you'd cut up a new pair of Levis to patch a hole in your old pair of jeans. No, the good news, the gospel of the Kingdom is a wedding feast, because I'm here, Jesus says, because the Bridegroom has come.

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Now Jesus describing himself as the bridegroom may not seem like much, but if you know the OT prophets, like Jesus' listeners did, this was some claim. Because who's the Bridegroom of Israel? It's God, it's Yahweh.

Isaiah 54:5: For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name"

Or Isaiah 62:5 "As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you."

Or Hosea 2:16-20: “in that day, declares the LORD, you will call me ‘My Husband.’... And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the LORD.”

And so Jesus is saying ‘Look, I’m here, the bridegroom has come and the days of mourning are over. I have come to call my people to me in covenant, faithful love.

Now this morning I talked about how this analogy to marriage can help us understand something of the nature of God’s love for us.

- I said that as the bridegroom woos the bride, and chases after this woman he wants to marry, so God seeks out his people, reaches out to them, to draw them to himself, to shower his love upon them.
- We saw how just as marriage is based on covenant love – no just covenant alone, nor just love alone, but covenant and love together, so the relationship between God and his people, his church is founded on that bond of covenant love in Christ.
- Then we saw how just as any marriage can only flourish when it’s exclusive, so God calls us not to have any God’s before him. That it is in having God as our God, and loving him before anything else that our relationship with him will flourish and at the same time everything else will fall into its right place.
- And finally, we saw that just as in marriage there is a very real sense in which the husband and wife are only truly complete when joined to the other in the one-flesh covenant, and how now I’m not fully me without Su, so we are only truly complete and whole when united with Christ through faith.

But this analogy also works the other way around as well. You see you could say, all this talk about Jesus being the Bridegroom and loving His church as the bride is all well and good but what practical use is that for me. How does that relate to my life? Well, what’s remarkable is that the way Paul applies this idea of Christ as the Bridegroom is to relate it directly to marriage. He takes this lofty idea of Christ loving and wooing the church, and he applies it to the nitty-gritty everyday life of marriage. And he says that from the beginning marriage has been about Jesus and the church, and that marriage has been designed to display the glory of God in Christ’s love for His bride.

And so for the rest of this evening I want to take Jesus telling us he’s the Bridegroom and use that as a springboard to see what that tells us about marriage, because that’s what Paul does. Now, you may not be married yet, and if you’re not, you young guys, this is especially for you. Because you probably will get married. And one day as Martin Luther famously said, you’ll wake up and find a pair of pig-tails on the pillow next to you, or ladies, you’ll find some guy, your husband in bed with you, and you’ll realize you’re married, and you will potentially save yourself years of pain if you get what marriage is all about sorted in your brain now.

Brides, Grooms and Christ

Listen to how Paul puts it in Ephesians 5:22-32 “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.”

So Paul is saying that all along, this one flesh covenant of marriage, a man and a woman leaving home to become one and make promises for life together, it's all been about Jesus and the church, *the* bridegroom and *the* bride.

And the way Christ's love for the church and the church's loving response to Christ works out in marriage for the ladies, Paul says, is that you should submit to your husbands. That just as the church submits to Christ, her bridegroom, in response to his love for her, so wives should submit to their husbands. And all the feminists start screaming!

And in part that's because of our wrong ideas about submission, and how this has been abused in the past. We hear submission and we think judo, throwing your opponent to the floor, pinning them to the ground and forcing them to submit. Well, my wife Su did Judo at university, so I know all about that kind of submission. But that's a million miles away from what Paul is talking about here.

Paul says v22 ladies, ‘wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.’ And your submission to Jesus isn't a forced submission. This isn't a submission that demeans you. You're not called to submit because you're inferior in dignity and worth to your man. And it's not because you're intellectually less able or less wise than your husband. I mean, Paul addresses the wives directly here. He doesn't say ‘Husbands, your wives are just blondes and they won't get this, so go home and explain it to little wifey’. There is no ‘little wifey’ in the Bible. The women of the bible are women like Deborah who spur the men to action. Or Huldah who the priests and princes go to for advice, or Ruth who by faith and action ends up being the great-great-great-however many times-great grandmother of Jesus. Or Esther who saves her people. Or the wife of Prov 31, this extraordinary, multi-competant homemaker and small business woman. In the NT you've got women praying and prophesying and serving and you've got a woman like Priscilla working alongside her husband Aquilla. The Bible is full of these great women of faith. It's never ‘little wifey’!

No the submission Paul talks about here is of a wife submitting to her husband in such a way that it displays your willing, glad, joy-filled submission to Jesus the

bridegroom. So, because it reflects the church's submission to Jesus it's going to be willing, not grudging, it's going to be thankful, not resentful; it's going to be joyfully given, not marked by fear or regret.

So that's how Paul applies Jesus the Bridegroom loving his bride, to the wives, to the brides. But then he turns to the husbands, to any of you young guys, married yet or not. He says in effect that your marriages will flourish where you as the husband seek to display the same covenant, faithful, tender love for your wife, that Jesus, the Bridegroom, has for his bride. That we should love our wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

That the way you treat your wife, the way you love your wife is to display the life-poured out love of Jesus. Because the way Jesus demonstrated his love for his bride was by laying down his life for her. And in the passage from Luke, Jesus says v35 'The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away... then they will fast.' Jesus knew that opposition to him was going to increase to such a point that they would take him away. He knew the Bridegroom was going to give his life for the bride.

So men, this is not a carte-blanche for you to treat your wife any how you like and sit like some coach potato playing video games while she picks up after you. It's not an open door for you to abuse her submission, it's a call to you to lay down your life for your wife, and through your serving her, and being tender towards her, and loving her to your personal cost that you put on public display Christ's love for the church. And Christ didn't wait to love or serve the church until after she had got her act together, and sorted her life out. Christ loved his bride when she didn't deserve it and couldn't earn it.

And that, Paul says, is what marriage is really about: Eph 5:31-32 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.'

And the Pharisees and John's disciples are worried about fasting, and what that says about Jesus. But Jesus says the days for mourning are over. The Bridegroom has come to give his life for his bride and win her to himself. And that is of far more than dusty, theological, academic interest. It tells us God loves us as a husband loves his bride, that he calls every one of us to come and be a part of his wedding feast, and join his bride. But it also tells us how we can build enduring God glorifying marriages, that showcase Christ's glorious love for his church to the world.